











THE STRENGTH OF CHRIST'S LITTLE ONES.

A S E R M O N,

PREACHED AT COGGESHALL,

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BY

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for the Church Schools of that place.

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1 S. JOHN ii. 14.

"I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the Word of GOD abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one."

It will, I suppose, be generally found, that as thoughtful Christians grow older, their sympathy and charity for the young increase. They are more and more aware of the nothingness of earthly things; more and more impressed with the greatness of the things of eternity; more and more sorrowful and ashamed to think, how unworthily they have felt and judged heretofore; and it fills them therefore daily with more anxious and compassionate concern, to look on those who are coming after them. They cast about earnestly how they may do them good knowing by their own experience, where they most need warning, and how hard it is to warn them effectually. As the natural man,—he whose heart and soul are wrapt up in the affairs of the world,—is tempted to envy those who are younger, because they have apparently so much before them of that for which alone he cares; so the spiritual man, whose treasure and heart are in heaven, watches them for the same reason with a loving pity, and is never so well pleased as when it is permitted him in any degree to help in hallowing their youthful affections, and turning their natural energies along the right course.

And this religious anxiety will obviously be deepened as the objects of it are in more danger. If the times are bad—if many tempters are abroad—seducing spirits and doctrines of devils—if the minds of many are being studiously trained to a false and proud self-dependence, and their hearts to dissipation and self-indulgence of

every kind: so much the more wakeful and active will the aged Christian prove himself, knowing that he hath but a short time to save (if it may be) one of these little ones from perishing.

Of all this the New Testament presents us with a most sacred and touching example in the blessed Apostle and Evangelist S. John, who lived to be the oldest, but seems at first to have been the youngest, of our LORD's personal attendants, and who, by a tradition singularly expressive of what I would now remark concerning him, is commonly represented as retaining in his extreme old age, even to the outward eye, the freshness and delicacy of early youth. It is well known that the writings of S. John, particularly this First Epistle, were the fruit of his very latest years; and no man, I think, can have read them attentively without being struck by his affectionate anxiety for the young. It is through the young, as it were, that he speaks to us all. From beginning to end his tone resembles that of an aged father or patriarch, who has gathered his young people round him, and speaks a grave word to them from time to time. This, rather than any course of set and regular discussion, is the tenor of the aged Saint's Epistle. He speaks as to "little children;" he refers them, as old men are wont, to that which he had seen with his eyes—which he had looked upon and his hands had handled—of JESUS CHRIST the Word of Life. He speaks to them of joy and light, the fulness of joy and the light without darkness,—clear, grand, and simple promises, and most apt to win the child-like and believing heart. He puts them in mind of their own recent anointing—the HOLY GHOST given them in Baptism and Confirmation, to be the pledge of spiritual strength, and yet abiding in them—not yet forfeited or driven away by any wilful or deadly sin. All these are tokens, how his apostolic heart yearned most especially with tender care for the young,—with admiration and sympathy for their energies, and with desire to have them all called out in CHRIST's service. And in one passage—that which I read to you just now—he distinctly expresses these feelings: "I have written unto you, young men, because ye are

strong and the Word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one." A Christian young man—*that* is the object which this aged Saint loves to look upon: the strength and courage,—the cheerfulness and fervour of youth, animated by the good Spirit of God, and manfully overcoming the world, the flesh, and the devil. And the same mind was shown in a different way, when, according to a known and certain anecdote, he laid himself out so affectionately for the conversion of a penitent youth, who in his absence, had lost himself in deadly sin. The Apostle sought the young man in his den of robbers, for all his own age and weakness, and would not leave him until he had brought him to a better mind.

It is, moreover, manifest that Saint John, in these anxious warnings, had an eye especially to the particular dangers of the time. For presently after that he has said, "I have written unto you, young men," he goes on to say, "Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that Antichrist shall come, even so now are there many Antichrists: whereby we know that it is the last time." Against these Antichrists, who denied the FATHER and the SON, the aged Apostle, the lover of youth, would have his young men use the courage and vigour of their time of life, sanctified, as it was, by the blessed SPIRIT, the anointing which yet abode in them. He would have them meet those who would seduce them by going back to the first simple principles, which they had learned when they were made Christians. "An old commandment I write unto you; the old commandment is the Word which ye heard from the beginning." "If that which ye have heard from the beginning abide in you, ye also shall continue in the SON and in the FATHER."

These affectionate warnings of the beloved disciple in the first age of Christianity, may we not with reason apply them to the work of Education in our own days, which, if not eminently and exclusively the last times, are at least included in them? Now, if ever, there are many Antichrists; now, if ever, there is need of energy and courage—moral energy, to hold fast by our first prin-

ciples. Observe the tests by which the Apostle would have his Christian young men try themselves, and see whether they will not answer equally as well, if applied as measures of Christian education now.

A school does its work, according to S. John, if it makes a Christian young man "strong." There must be a certain life, and energy, in all that we do for our Master's sake—a fixed resolution not to be overcome by false shame. We must be stubborn in a good sense—abiding by what we know to be right, though we cannot prove it nor defend it in words. And this, both in doctrine and morals: in doctrine, clinging to the ancient uncorrupt Creed, with a childlike dependence on what we have heard from the beginning; with an implicit faith, such as children have in their parents; not able to say why, but knowing and feeling that they are right. There are many appearances as though S. John had written his Gospel on purpose, among other things, to recommend such a course to the lambs of CHRIST'S flock; and who can doubt but that a chief part of the blessings of those who believe without seeing belongs to those who courageously practise and teach this only good way?

I say, *teach* as well as *practise*: because in our days, especially, there is so much temptation to be cowardly, both in instructing, and in receiving instruction. To dogmatize exactly—to inculcate the Creeds as they are, especially with the sanction of their anathemas—to hold fast the form of sound words,—all this is hardly endured in the Church; and it is daily becoming more and more fashionable to call it mere bigotry in the School.

Again, to keep up Discipline on principle is also a work of high moral courage; for discipline, turn it which way you will, cannot be without occasional punishment. The idea of punishment must enter into the system, how seldom soever it may be enforced. Now the tone and tendency of this age is to dispense with all punishment, both in education and in civil society. And yet Solomon's word, repeated over and over, is express—"He that spareth the rod hateth his child." What is more, the principle of abolishing pains and penalties, if consist-

ently followed out, would charge the Most High Himself with lack of mercy or of wisdom. For if government is best carried on without penal enactments, why are there so many Scriptures telling us of everlasting punishment? Yet so it is, that in our time, whoever will act on this principle, must not only control his in-born heathenish good nature, but must oppose himself also to the general tone and temper of the age. He will need a double share of moral courage and firmness.

But the self-denial will be worth the cost; for (be sure of it) it is a fundamental, ruinous error, in any system of education, to waver, or encourage wavering, either in what is taught or in the way of enforcing it—either in the Creed or the Commandments. It is a falling away from Christian fortitude; enough, in no long time, to enervate and corrupt a whole Church and nation for ages. Let us be warned of it, for surely we are in some danger. Little comfort will it be to us hereafter, that our scholars and the lambs of our flock are able to answer many questions, well stored with knowledge as such, both religious and secular, but untaught, through neglect on our part, to carry out what they know, and abide by it for better or worse: unstable in doctrine, and irresolute in keeping the Commandments.

And to give them the better chance, both we of the Clergy, and all others who are more or less concerned in training them, must arm ourselves with passive as well as with active courage: I mean, we must make up our minds, not only to be distinct and unswerving in doctrine, constant, yet considerate, in discipline, but also to endure much disappointment—to seem to ourselves and others very often as though we were utterly failing, yet to go on, not changing our principles, but calling ourselves to a stricter account for not having acted more entirely up to them. Our Master Himself has condescended mysteriously to bear our burden, as in all other respects, so in this grievous one, of seeming disappointment and failure when all has been done for the best. He Himself is represented as complaining: "I have laboured in vain; I have spent My strength for nought and in vain." He cries out to His

ungrateful city, "How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings! and ye would not." He was troubled in spirit when Judas had gone out to betray Him—Judas, whom He had so highly favoured, and to whom He had been just giving such merciful warnings. CHRIST was grieved for Judas; and His HOLY SPIRIT is daily grieved by too many—would we need not add by the great majority of Christians—who refuse to come unto Him, or to continue with Him, that they may have life. Therefore the teachers and patrons of Christian schools must make up their minds to bear the like sort of disappointment; for the servant is not greater than his LORD. We must not be disheartened, if year after year we look around us, and seem to behold little or no fruit of our labours; nor yet if, as is very likely, we hear ourselves charged by the impatient spirit of our times with doing nothing, while all around is in progress. It may be that at the very time that they are so triumphing over us, and we beginning to repine or despond, as quite put out of countenance by them,—it may be that at that very time the angels in Heaven may be rejoicing over some penitent soul, who has been converted and saved by the remembrance of that same despised teaching, and of the discipline which went along with it; and souls in Paradise may be thanking GOD for it—for the Creed and Commandments which it taught them, and the Christian fortitude to which it trained them. It may be that whilst we are counting over our scholars, and grieving that there are not more of them, the all-seeing Eye may behold in some few or one of them qualities and endowments, which shall eventually do more for His glory than a far greater number trained in a more popular way. "Make a few saints," was the advice given by one who knew well, when he was to say what occurred to him as the mark and standard of success in education. And the making and training of saints is of course a hidden work; whether a man prospers in it or no, cannot be known for certain until the Great Day. Therefore the patrons and promoters of Church schools have need to be patient as well as courageous. As their object is not

the same with that of the promoters of civil and secular education, so the measures of their success and failure are different. They must be content to cast their bread upon the waters, in hope to find it after many days. They must be patient until the coming of the LORD, as the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it. They must walk by faith, not by sight. They must teach the Creed and Commandments, whether men will hear or whether they will forbear. As to the event, they must leave that in God's hand.

What we say to the conductors and prime movers of education, we say also to those who help them and teach under them, every one in his place and measure. They also have need to be strong through the Word of GOD abiding in them, and through the consciousness that the Spirit of GOD, given to them in Holy Baptism, has helped them to overcome the wicked one, keeping them from grievous sin, or recovering them out of it. I need scarcely point out how exactly all this applies to the case of voluntary teachers—young men and women coming forward in aid of their pastor, to work in Church Schools, for the benefit of their still younger and more helpless brethren. To such the beloved Disciple seems as it were to address himself especially this day, and to say, “You are yet strong—yet firm and steady in your loving labour for CHRIST and His little ones; go on and prosper; go on in His name and with His blessing; but lay your account with temptations and difficulties; do not think it hard if you are sometimes scorned, perhaps by your own companions—perhaps by others whom you would greatly wish to please; let them laugh, and do you go on in your work; for why should you care who laughs at you, when you remember our LORD's promise, given to those who help His children, if it be but to a cup of cold water? And remember that if you are to do any real good, you must fortify yourselves continually, by faith and prayer, and above all, by constantly receiving of CHRIST's Body and Blood, against the snares and seductions of your time of life. If it seem occasionally a hard thing to spend your Sunday hours, the chief

part, may be, of your hours of leisure, in teaching, or in other works of charity and devotion, consider that it is just how the devil would have it appear to you; put away the thought as coming immediately from him. I need not add, much more put away all enticing thoughts of vain or criminal pleasures. As often as ye do this ye overcome the wicked one.

“Watch, too, against weariness, both in teaching and in all Church-work; in all that you try to do, both for yourselves and others, whether in the way of instruction or devotion, watch against inward and spiritual weariness: of course it will come; you cannot help it; but let it not be your own fault. Your great helper in this work must be meditation on our LORD’s Passion, and on the lives and sufferings of His saints. ‘Could ye not watch *with ME*?’ was His own question; *with ME*, Who was even then in agony for you; *with ME*; let that one recollection sink deep in your hearts, and it will make you His faithful attendants and sentinels for ever.”

And now I would speak one word to you also—to you, little children, who are in some sort most concerned in this day’s work: I say to you, Be strong and very courageous, to do what you know to be right. Many things said in this place, you of course cannot at all understand or enter into; many anxieties, which sink deeply into the hearts of your elders who care for you, are to you just nothing at all; you cannot comprehend either them, or the warnings, counsels, and consolations for which they give occasion. But this one saying you can understand, “Be strong and of good courage, for the LORD your GOD is He that fighteth for you.” Be strong, not to be laughed out of good customs—to say your prayers night and morning, on your knees, with all attention and reverence. Be strong, to behave well at Church, not minding foolish companions. Be strong, to speak out the truth in great things and in small. Be strong, to refrain from all bad words, and not to seem pleased with others’ bad words. Be strong, to seal up your eyes from seeing things shameful, and your ears from hearing of evil. Be strong in these things, and teach those who are younger the same;

for by these things the good Providence of GOD is training and preparing you for the trials of after years. If a boy at school shows himself *really determined* to do right in any particular, he will soon get the character of doing so, and then the tempter will so far let him alone. And so, by and by, when changes and distractions arise—as in these days they are sure to arise—they whose childhood has been trained in a holy stubbornness will stand fast in their first faith. The hope that kept them from swerving in their young years will prove to them an anchor of the soul, sure and stedfast. And should there be no more of public change and revolution, yet, since life is continually changing, and we are all of us hourly coming upon some new thing, we have all need to be strong and to hold our own; we have all need to be resolved beforehand that nothing (please GOD)—no, not an angel from Heaven—shall turn us aside from the Creed and Commandments which we have learned.

Why should we fear so to resolve? since it is not on our own strength that we rely—no, not for a single moment; but only on His supporting arm, by whom before now thousands of youths and maidens, nay, and young children too, no more in themselves than any one of us, have been strengthened to bear witness even unto death. They were at first as we or any ordinary persons—boys and girls at school—young men and women in temptation,—tried by all manner of passions and appetites, by bad men and seducing spirits; but GOD our SAVIOUR gave them His grace, the same grace which He offers unto us, in Baptism first, then in Confirmation, and afterwards in Holy Communion; He taught them by His Word; He showed them the examples of His saints who had gone before; He brought them to pray and be prayed for in His Church; and they accepted His graces and privileges; they turned not unthankfully away, but used what He gave: and now they are rejoicing with Him in Heaven. I speak unto you, young men and maidens, and to you, little children: there was a time when they, even the holiest of them, were but as you are now; and you—it is a thrilling but

fearful thought—if you will employ what GOD has given you, may be one day as they are. Only be strong and very courageous; turn not aside to the right hand nor to the left: remember what was said to Joshua, whose calling was indeed a type of young Christians invited to high privileges in evil times: “This Book of the Law shall not depart out of thy mouth, but thou shalt meditate therein by day and by night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein; for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success. Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be dismayed, for the LORD thy GOD is with thee whithersoever thou goest.” The least of you who shall keep this saying will be a saint in Heaven: GOD grant that here may be many such: and to the rest of us, who shall have proved unworthy of such transcendent favour, may He grant at least the grace of true penitency, and a will to offer freely of what we have, in support of a cause which so greatly needs it: that when we all—promoters, teachers, scholars, and visitors,—shall be called to give an account of this school and of this day’s work, we may do it, by His mercy, with joy, and not with grief; through JESUS CHRIST our LORD; to Whom, with the FATHER and the HOLY GHOST, Three Persons and one GOD, be all honour and glory, world without end. Amen.



